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ABSTRACT

A planned 3-year joint project of the Nordic research council for the humanities that focuses on writing development in school-age children is described. Four Nordic countries are involved in the project: Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. In the study, discourse-level performance analyses of student writing in English as a Second Language are to be undertaken at several different age and skill levels. In the first stage, performance analyses of a small number of texts are used to isolate writing skills variables for further examination. Subjects are students in the second year of secondary school. In the second stage, in-depth analysis of the selected variables is to be performed on a larger, national language corpora. The investigation focuses on several common variables (lexical cohesion, theme dynamics, and connectors), with additional differential analyses in each participating country (for Finland: discourse functions; for Sweden: reference and substitution; for Norway: temporal sequence; for Denmark: pragmatic coherence). In each country, the analysis is performed at four grade levels, varying by country but including late comprehensive, secondary, and higher education. Comparisons are then to be made across countries and grade levels. Norway's study on temporal sequence is described in somewhat greater detail. A 26-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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THE NORDWRITE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents an outline of a new three-year joint Nordic research project focusing on performance analyses of discourse-level parameters in Nordic students' EFL written production at several age and skill levels. At the first stage (1986), several performance analyses of a small number of texts are being carried out in order to isolate variables that correlate with student development as to age and skill level. These analyses will be exemplified in the paper by preliminary analyses of temporal sequence in Swedish students' written narratives. At the second stage (1987-88), in-depth descriptive analyses of a small number of variables in a large number of texts will be carried out. These analyses will be computer-assisted.

1. Introduction

Recent interest in the text level in applied linguistic research has raised a number of new and important questions also in the Nordic countries. Some of the questions concern the development of writing abilities among students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

In 1986 a joint Nordic research project on EFL writing in schools has been initiated with the financial support of NOS-H, the joint committee of the Nordic research councils for the humanities. The aim of the three-year NORDWRITE project is to carry out discourse-level performance analyses of EFL compositions written by students in four Nordic countries.

1.1. Why writing?

The NORDWRITE project concentrates on the development of written EFL skills in the Nordic countries. This focus has several reasons. For small countries in our part of the world, foreign language communication is

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crucial in many contexts - cultural, economical and technical. More specifically, English plays a special role as the most important foreign language, and sustained communication in English is very often written. This situation raises an important point concerning cultural policy: If members of the Nordic countries want to be senders of messages and not just receivers of messages, writing in English is an essential skill.

Given this background, the teaching of foreign language writing in schools becomes an important question. However, most recent developments of language curricula and teaching methods in applied linguistics have centered on oral skills, and the methods available for the teaching of writing are still mostly very traditional, centered around what may be regarded as a pedagogical avoidance strategy - simply assigning and correcting essays. The students receive very little help with regard to the actual writing process going on in between.

It has been documented by a large-scale Norwegian survey of grades 8-11 that writing is felt to be more difficult than any other skill, by both students and teachers, in both first language and foreign language (EFL) contexts (see Evensen, forthcoming). Furthermore, scholars have questioned the student abilities attained in written foreign language communication, even at university levels (see Lindeberg 1984).

1.2. Why discourse?

The project's focus on the discourse level in writing is also based on several considerations. Language in use is discourse, not utterances or speech acts in isolation. This means that for genuine written communication the discourse level is essential.

In the educational context it has been documented that the discourse level of writing in schools is particularly problematic, along with vocabulary (see the survey mentioned above). This finding implies that insight into student problems at the textual and lexical levels of description is one important prerequisite for research-based attempts at improving teaching.

Recent developments in text linguistics/discourse analysis and applied linguistics (performance analysis) have produced several tools for investigating student writing at this level of description (cf. van Dijk 1985). For Nordic cooperation, the new Nordic research group for theoretical and applied text linguistics (NORDTEXT) is also an important resourse (see NORDTEXT Newsletter I, 1984).

' In the Nordic countries, several exploratory performance analyses of student EFL writing have been carried out in recent years (see Linnarud 1978; Lindeberg 1984; Evensen 1985). What is needed, however, are larger, descriptive studies, where some phenomena are studied in more detail. For this purpose, international cooperation is essential, given the limited resources that are presently available in each of the Nordic countries.

2. Aims

This background leads to the two questions that the project attempts to illuminate:

- to what extent are certain discourse-level features (see below) mastered at different intermediate/advanced levels of EFL acquisition?
- how are different discourse-level characteristics related to evaluation of text quality in the educational context?

An answer to these questions will be based on performance analyses of texts written by students at six grade levels in four Nordic countries.

3. The Method

The project will be carried out in two stages. At the first, exploratory stage (1986) a small number of texts are being analyzed with regard to a relatively large number of variables. On the basis of this stage, a small number of variables will be isolated for more in-depth analysis at the second, descriptive stage (1987-1988).

3.1. The Material

The exploratory analyses are based on three corpora which are described in the first work-in-progress report from the project, printed as Trondheim Papers in Applied Linguistics (TRAPIS), Vol. 2. A Swedish corpus of nine picture-based love stories produced by students in their

second year of secondary school (Gymnasieskolan) forms a basis for narrative analysis (see Linnarud 1986 and this volume). The texts have been evaluated by three sets of evaluators and divided into sub-sets termed LO, MID and HI. In the exploratory corpus there are three texts in each of these groups. Analyses of this corpus are exemplified in section 5 below.

At the second stage, new national corpora will be established on the basis of statistic sampling criteria. Stratification will be based on regions/ first language/dialect areas (four values), urbanization of school communities (two values), grade level (four values in each country, with partial overlap), text type (three values) and text quality (three values). This design will result in national data bases of 288 texts with an expected total of approximately 70-75.000 words. For quantitative analyses of relatively rare phenomena the Trondheim Corpus will also be available (1405 EFL texts with approximately 350.000 words).

The texts in the national corpora will be evaluated by the students' EFL teachers. In addition, a sub-sample will be evaluated by an independent group of three evaluators (see Larsson 1984). This sub-sample will function as basic material for intensive studies.

3.2. The Approach

Performance analysis has been chosen as the methodological approach for the project. This choice reflects historical developments in applied linguistics. In earlier applied linguistics, contrastive analysis between first language and target language was the preferred approach (see Lado 1957). There were some problems with this approach, however, that led to more emphasis on errors actually produced by students. A strong version of contrastive analysis predicted errors that do not often occur, and certain errors that do occur are not due to interference from the first language. Error analysis did not face such problems (Rusiecki 1976).

Error analysis has other weaknesses, though. It is not sufficient in order to describe foreign language use which is not erroneous, just generally poor. Also, it does not capture the systematic nature of learners' developing foreign language competence (Schachter 1974). This interlanguage (Selinker 1972) can only be described if both errors and achievements are taken into account (ie. analysis of general performance).

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In performance analysis both contrastive analysis and error analysis have a role to play.

3.3. The Variables

The selection of variables for the exploratory stage has been based on learner problems documented in the Nordic countries (see Linnarud 1978; Evensen 1983, forthcoming; Lindeberg 1984). The analyses are organized around a commom core of variables, with additional national branching:

COMMON - lexical cohesion
- theme dynamics (textual aspects of information structure)
- connectors (conjunctions and connective sentence adverbials)

FINLAND - discourse functions (patterns of causality, contrast, specification, etc.)
SWEDEN - reference/ substitution (pronouns and other proforms, definiteness and ellipsis)
NORWAY - temporal sequence (verb forms in relation to text type and global coherence)
DENMARK - pragmatic coherence (sequencing of communicative acts)

Initial analyses aim at isolating variables that both discriminate between different skill levels and between different age levels. The exploratory analyses are used as a basis for establishing a common methodological procedure for the project (see TRANS 2 for more detailed discussions of methodology) and subsequent tests of inter-researcher reliability toward the end of the exploratory stage.

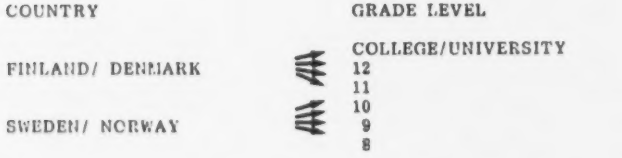
3.4. The Descriptive stage

Based on the exploratory analyses, one variable, or a few interrelated variables, will be selected for in-depth analysis of the larger national corpora at the second, descriptive stage.

Some national branching is part of the design also for the second stage. The Swedish project will make a comparison between Swedish and British learners of English in comparable age groups. The Danish project will focus on foreign language learners' writing processes and strategies, whereas the Norwegian project will use material from learner and teacher questionnaires on writing problems, pedagogical practices and demographic background to aid the interpretation of linguistic analyses.

At the descriptive stage, machine-aided procedures will also be necessary. Standard software (search functions, concordance, analysis of item/ pattern frequency, etc.) will form the basis for semi-automatic approaches. Some degree of software development will however also be necessary (probably within grammar-free parsing).

The analyses will focus on four grade levels in each national project. The Swedish and Norwegian projects will analyse material from students in the eigth and ninth years of comprehensive school and the first and second years of secondary school. The Finnish and Danish projects analyse material from all grades of secondary school, but also include first year students at college/ university level. This design allows for cross-sectional analysis of development at six grade levels, where comparative studies are possible between at least two countries at each level. Relatively comprehensive coverage is thus made possible without a parallel increase in the work-load for each member of the research group. The design in presented graphically below:



4. The Organisation

The project is organized around a research group consisting of one member from each of the participant countries. The members of the group are:

- Moira Linnarud, University of Lund, Sweden
- Dorthe Albrechtsen, University of Copenhagen, Denmark (succeeding Claus Faerch)
- Ann Charlotte Lindeberg, Åbo Akademi/ The Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration, Helsinki, Finland
- Lars Sigfred Evensen, University of Trondheim, Norway (project leader)

The group is assisted in its work by an advisory council. The members of the council are:

- Nils Erik Enkvist, Abo Akademi, Finland
- Lita Lundquist, The Copenhagen School of Economics and Business Administration, Denmark
- Gunnel Källgren, University of Stockholm, Sweden
- Elisabeth Ingram, University of Trondheim, Norway.

5. Temporal sequence

5.1. Introduction

The exploratory NORDWRITE studies will be illustrated with one example from initial work within the Norwegian part of the project. Since Werlich's (1976) analysis it has been recognized that certain genres may be crudely defined by unmarked verb form sequence[1]. Preterite verb forms in sequence strongly signal that the text is a narrative, whereas a sequence of verb stems signal that the text is instructional. Similarly, expository/argumentative text forms are recognized, among other things, by sequences of simple present verb forms, as the unmarked case.

What is less commonly recognized is the fact that verb form sequence also helps to signal meso-level construction of texts. In argumentative texts, short narratives may be used as illustration. In scientific articles the material/methodology section is partly signalled by a switch to unmarked simple past (Selinker et al. 1978).

Furthermore, there is a hierarchy of parameter weights involved (cf. Enkvist 1976 on parameter weighting). Descriptions are normally marked by simple present, and narratives may contain descriptive sections. The simple past marking is, however, normally strong enough to override the subsection marking, with the result that descriptive sections in narratives stay within the unmarked simple past sequence. This fact led Werlich (1976:47ff) astray. He analyzed past tense as unmarked for descriptive texts without realizing that his examples were taken from subsections of past tense stories.

1 I prefer not to use terms like 'tense' or 'temporal sequence' because grammatical tense and chronological sequence are only part of the game. Verb form sequence includes both aspectual and modal features.

5.2. A tentative taxonomy

This brief exposition implies that changes in verb form sequence may very well be motivated by considerations of discourse strategy. Still, it is common knowledge among school teachers that weaker students sometimes mix tenses without any apparent discourse-strategic reason. In order to take care of this crucial distinction in analyses of student writing, it is necessary to establish a tentative taxonomy of cases where shifts in narrative verb form sequence are motivated by strategic principles (see TRANS 2 for a more comprehensive taxonomy). In genuine written communication, verb fron sequence is in no way a strait-jacket.

(i) The first case is well known from traditional grammar. Direct speech is not constrained by the unmarked verb form sequence:

(1) She said: Yes I will marry you.

(ii) Transition from the setting/orientation to narrative action also allows for a shift in temporal sequence. An example from the student material may illustrate this:

(2) Ron was a very sad man... Now he lived in a small town called Bexhill.
It's a very fine day... Ron is walking on the street, when he suddenly see a girl...

These transitions are often marked by temporal pointers (see TRANS 2) like ... years/weeks... ago.

(iii) A part of the setting may be foregrounded. One way of accomplishing this is to introduce a switch from unmarked past to simple (narrative) present within a descriptive section. This rather clever trick is exploited by the poorest writer in the material (quoted above) and helps explain why this text at first sounds quite promising to some readers, in spite of the mixing of tenses in the second sentence.

(3) Ron was a very sad man. He has lost his wife for three years ago. Now he lived in a small town called Bexhill.
It's a very fine day in April. The sun is shining and it's rather hot. Ron is walking on the street, when he suddenly see a girl in front of him with very long hair...

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(iv) Narratives may also contain descriptive sections offering background information for some point that is brought up by the narrative. It was pointed out above that such sections normally lose the 'battle' of parameter weighting and remain within the unmarked simple past sequence. However, if background descriptions contain generic statements, this aspect will normally be strong enough to override the simple past sequence. One of Mann and Thompson's (1986:66) example sequences exemplify this pattern:

(4) Hayes just resigned. He's our chancellor

In a Norwegian study of L1 narrative writing, Aarek (1984) has reported on verb form sequence in 322 pupil narratives in grades 1-6 with the title "17th of May". Comprehensive school pupils seem to master this pattern early, as when a student writes within a past tense narrative: "17. mai er en nasjonaldag. Den blir feiret over hele Norge." (May 17 is an Independence Day. It is celebrated all over Norway.)

The generic character is often signalled by adverbials like use to, always, never, every day/week... One of the poorer texts in the Swedish material exemplifies this use of adverbials when the writer says:

(5) He is walking after a girl with long hair. Horace has always liked girls with long hair".

(v) Van Dijk (1977) has noted that the pluperfect may be introduced to signal a mismatch between verbal sequence and underlying chronological sequence. This match is basic to the narrative contract (see Labov and Waletzky 1967) and a major function of the pluperfect is to signal deviations from the unmarked case (but see also vi below).

(6) Old Mr. Bond went looking for the spy as soon as he had gulped down his seventh double Scotch

(vi) Deviations from the unmarked experiential iconicity (cf. Enkvist 1981) may also occur when a portion of the underlying chronological sequence is left out of the narrative (termed 'literary ellipsis' by Genette 1972). Literary ellipsis is another feature which is sometimes signalled by the pluperfect or the present perfect in narratives based on literary present tense:

(7) When they have been married for a couple of weeks, Mr. Smith starts to complaining of his wifes long dark hair.

(vii) The last category to be included in this restricted taxonomy consists of cases where the writer steps out of the narrative past to comment on the immediate here and now or make metacomments on text production itself:

(8) ... and I have no proof that Jesus died on the cross. He was, by all accounts, a man of immense stature and strenght with huge lungs rendered the more powerful by the practice of a kind of oratory. (Anthony Burgess, The Kingdom of the Wicked)

In this section, Burgess ends a present tense meta-introduction of several pages, and the long story about the first Christians begins - in the middle of the paragraph. A very effective literary metamorphosis.

In oral discourse, comments seen from the writer's here and now are quite common, as in this narrative ending:

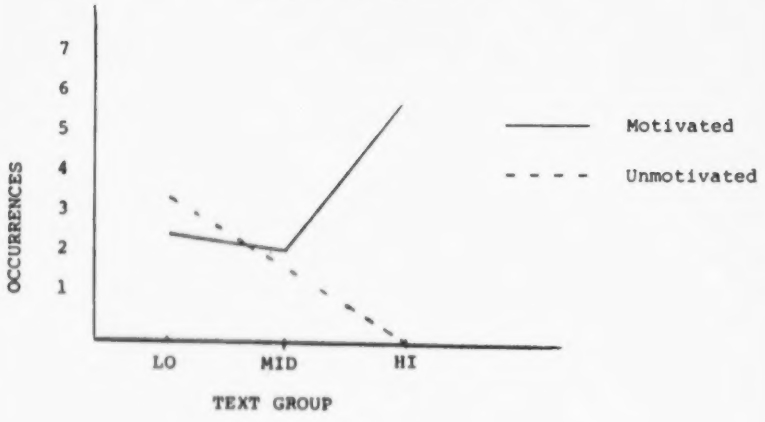
(9) ...and then we left for home. Oh, I've forgotten to tell you about the kitten...

In writing, this category seems to be characteristic only of narratives produced by relatively young writers. Aarek (1984) has documented several occurrences in L1 writing in grades 1-6, but it does not occur in the present material.

5.3. Some empirical results

The taxonomy makes it possible to make a preliminary distinction between 'unmotivated' and 'motivated' breaks in verb form sequence. In the present exploratory analysis all breaks which do not fall into any of the categories within our tazonomy have been tabulated as occurrences of so-called 'mixed tenses'. In Figure 1 below the uses of both motivated and "unmotivates" breaks are presented as frequences found in each of the text groups.

Figure 1. Breaks in temporal sequence



It is clear that unmotivated breaks are a feature typical only of poor writers at this level, whereas motivated breaks are typical only of good writers. These measures, then, discriminate very well between different skill levels in the present material.

5. Concluding Remarks

The NOS-H grant to the NORDWRITE project should be seen as a victory for Nordic cooperation in applied language studies. It is to be hoped that the project will act as a stimulus for further Nordic cooperation in this field. At each national level, the resources available for research purposes are limited. At the Nordic level, however, much more can be achieved.

At the time of writing, work within the project has been developing only for a few months. It is thus to be hoped that researchers who are interested in discourse-level writing skills contact us for mutual benefit. The problems facing language teaching are still so many, and the attempts at research-based solutions so few.

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